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DOE REACHES CLEANUP MILESTONE AT HANFORD

More than a million gallons of radioactive waste that threatened the Columbia River have been removed from aging underground tanks at the Department of Energy's (DOE) Hanford Site since 1998.

That's when pumping operations began on the last of Hanford's 149 older, single-shell tanks containing removable liquid waste. An aggressive schedule negotiated by the DOE and the state of Washington tracks progress on the project.

While the million-gallon achievement is not a regulatory milestone, DOE officials said the accomplishment symbolizes the hard work and technical innovations that have enabled the department to meet or beat deadline after deadline. Of the eight tanks scheduled to begin pumping operations in fiscal year 2001, five tanks have already been started.

"The focused and dedicated efforts of this project team are reducing the risk here at Hanford," said Harry Boston, Acting Manager of DOE's Office of River Protection. "We're making progress by removing the liquid waste from the older tanks, and we're reducing the risk to the Columbia River and the people of the Pacific Northwest."

Although solids and sludge will remain in the tanks, transferring the liquid waste to newer, safer double-shell tanks is crucial to reducing the risk of a future leak. In the past, more than a third of Hanford's single-shell tanks leaked an estimated one million gallons of radioactive waste.

"The tanks have been our state's highest priority for cleanup at Hanford because of their past leaks and their ongoing threat to the environment," said Mike Wilson, who heads the state Department of Ecology program that monitors and enforces progress on the Hanford cleanup project. "We're very happy with the progress on pumping out the tanks during the past year and a half, and we look forward to getting a treatment facility in place to further reduce the threat from these wastes."

Under the consent decree, October 2004 is the deadline for pumping the retrievable liquid waste from 29 single-shell tanks. Pumping of six of those tanks is complete, and crews with DOE tank farms contractor CH2M HILL Hanford Group have initiated pumping 11 of the remaining 23 tanks under the agreement. Company officials expect to start seven more tanks this fiscal year, which runs through October 2001.

"This is a story about people working against the odds to safely get the job done," said CH2M HILL President and General Manager Fran DeLozier. "Despite formidable challenges posed by aging equipment, breakdowns and slower than expected pumping rates, the project team is working ahead of schedule."

DeLozier said much of the credit goes to continued improvements in the project team's efficiency. She also credits a new waste transfer system developed to solve flammable gas problems in double shell Tank SY-101, also known as the "burping" tank. An aboveground hose-in-hose line, rather than aging underground pipes, was used last year to transfer 520,000 gallons of waste out of the tank.

Since August, CH2M HILL crews have been using the new hose-in-hose transfer system on the single-shell tanks. If sensors along the length of the hose indicate a leak, pumping is automatically shut down. The hose maintains the waste's temperature to help keep it from plugging the line. The lines are placed in shallow trenches and covered with steel plates to protect the line and provide shielding from radiation.

"Using the old transfer system last year we had three leaks, " said CH2M HILL Single-Shell Tanks Project Director Rick Raymond. "One involved waste and the other two were contaminated water. We projected that if we didn't do something differently, there would be one transfer system leak per year. The new hose-in-hose system eliminates that risk, and it's going to help us get the liquid waste out of the tanks sooner."

Raymond estimated the innovative transfer system will help CH2M HILL finish the project six to 12 months early and cut costs by $4 million to $5 million.

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Note: Congress created The Office of River Protection in 1998 to manage the nation's largest and most complex environmental cleanup project - retrieval and treatment of tank waste at the Hanford Site. More background information on the Office of River Protection can be found on the office's Web site at: http://www.hanford.gov/orp

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